No rules — just some music, bold instincts, and a brush

Carmel's Artists

By DENNIS TAYLOR

Before he begins a new painting, Jason Kurzer — known professionally as Kurz — sits alone for a while with a cigarette, a beverage and his music.

A playlist he called "10,000" — as in 10,000 songs — has been growing organically, chronologically, for 14 years. He can click on it anywhere to be pleasantly surprised by a song he instantly fell in love with years ago and maybe hasn't heard since. The music frequently transports him to whatever mood or emotion he was experiencing when he added the song.

A separate playlist, "Sadder," is packed with melodic rarities that stir melancholy feelings from another time.

"I cannot paint without music," he explained. "I cannot think without music."

His muse guides him to a blank canvas where rules don't apply. Kurz is an abstract artist, a mixed-media anarchist who grants his creativity unobstructed permission to go its own direction. He trusts his instincts.

'Gossip room'

He usually creates his art on either of two decks that flank a second-story Ocean Avenue apartment that, six decades ago, was briefly the home of Spanish surrealist Salvador Dali and a popular gathering spot for Carmel's 1940s community of well-known artists, writers, thespians and other free spirits. They called the dwelling "The Gossip Room," a nickname found over the front door.

Friday, Oct. 2, from 5 to 8 p.m., Kurz and abstract artist Bekah Bull, his roommate and life partner, will celebrate the grand opening of their new gallery, High Flow, at 546 Dolores St., directly across from the Carmel Art Association.

Remarkable tale

Where Kurz came from and how he found his way here, physically and mentally, is a remarkable tale of cause-and-effect.

"If I couldn't paint, I'd go crazy. I need to make art — this is my outlet," said Kurzer, who first picked up a brush in 2014, the same year he partnered romantically with Bekah, who, by then, had been a friend for almost a decade.

At 48, he draws heavily on a life experienced pockmarked with false starts and unrealized aspirations, and characterized by relentless reinvention.

Kurzer's career and creative dreams included professional basketball, photography, and filmmaking, pursuits that took him from the outskirts of gritty Flint, Mich., to New York City, Chicago, downtown Los Angeles, Colorado's mountains, Napa Valley, and, finally, here.

That's where painting blossomed from an interest into a lifeblood and, in recent months, a profession.

Nothing to do

Serendipity played a significant role in his success — no question — but multipronged natural talents and bold artistic instincts have sold his work.



PHOTO/BEKAH BULL

Abstract mixed-media artist Jason Kurzer, known professionally as 'Kurz,' poses with a painting entitled 'Inner Bloom,' part of Friday's grand opening of High Flow, a new Carmel gallery he shares with fellow abstract artist Bekah Bull.

Neither Kurz nor Bekah was a passionate painter until the couple moved to Carmel — just in time for the Covid shutdown.

"We basically started painting together because there was nothing else to do. Then, we couldn't stop," Kurz said.

Bekah's dad — acclaimed British-American painter Simon Bull — dropped in for a visit one day and was surprised to find very good paintings stacked floor to ceiling. He immediately insisted on showing them at Meuse Gallery, the Ocean Avenue business where he showcases the art of Erin Lee Gafill, Amy Donaldson, and the mysterious street artist, "Banksy."

For Kurz, the breakthrough took time: He recalls earning zero money from his paintings until just before the new year in 2025, when a Pebble Beach couple wandered into Meuse Gallery and purchased $30,000 worth of his art.

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Eight months later, an 80-year-old Oakland woman fell in love with his work, spent $45,000 for multiple pieces and commissioned him to paint more.

"It's been surreal, absolutely mind-blowing," he admitted.

High hopes

Kurz, 6 feet 6 inches tall, grew up with a basketball dream, "playing all day, every day" from ages 6 to 22 on the outskirts of Flint until his fantasy of an NBA career vaporized during a game against elite competition. An otherworldly spin move and slam-dunk by the player he was guarding brought an epiphany.

"In my mind, that's the moment when I quit basketball," he said. "I just told myself, 'This dude is on a whole different level.'" Indeed, he realized he was surrounded by players who were on another level.

Shocked toward practicality, he briefly aspired to become a chiropractor but changed his mind on the day he was supposed to leave for chiropractic school in a neighboring state.

Next, he became smitten with photography, thanks to an inspirational community college teacher and a "supermodel" girlfriend with a nice camera.

He moved to Chicago and changed direction again, enrolling in film school "after watching John Cusack in 'High Fidelity' about 10 times in a row," he recalled. "That movie made me laugh and cry and feel better, and I decided that making movies was what I wanted to do."

One class short of graduation, Kurz decided to finish his education in Los Angeles.

That's where life became increasingly bizarre.

He was frightened out of his first apartment when a random stranger knocked on the door and stuck a gun in his face.

In immediate need of safe storage for his electronic equipment, Kurzer abruptly rented 200 square feet of a downtown warehouse from a heroin addict, who told him he couldn't sleep there.

Homeless for the first time, Kurz lived in his car, worked at Applebee's and attended film classes in Studio City until he met Pete, a perpetually jobless, homeless artist and heroin addict whose wealthy dad helped his son become Kurz's roommate.

They moved into a loft on the seventh floor of the Pacific Electric Building in downtown Los Angeles, a place with a rooftop swimming pool, hot tub, and courtyards.

"The loft was $2,200 a month, plus $2,200 deposit, plus the last month's rent," remembered Kurz, who paid his half from his savings and restaurant earnings. Pete's dad footed the rest of the bill, then kept the contributions coming to keep his troubled son off the street.

Crash Mansion

A month later, Kurz wandered out of his bedroom and found a woman sitting in the window in her underwear.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Pete's girlfriend," replied Bekah Bull, age 19.

She and two more artists moved in (Kurz and Pete's father remained the only rent-payers), an arrangement that lasted eight months. Then, "a cubic zirconia king bought the building," Kurz remembered.

Their next dwelling, on a month-to-month lease, was a space in the basement of Crash Mansion, a 14,000-square-foot live-music nightclub famous for wild parties.

Kurz spent subsequent years creating music and videos during his spare hours, while making ends meet with his restaurant earnings.

A decade after he found Bekah sitting in his window, Kurz was residing in a downtown apartment — "kitty-corner from L.A.'s Skid Row," he said — when his phone rang.

"She called me out of nowhere. She was coming downtown for a friend's wedding and asked me to go with her," he reminisced. "She stayed the night, then never left."

Quirky videos

The couple left Los Angeles that year and spent time in Aspen, Colo., and St. Helena in Napa Valley before settling in Carmel-by-the-Sea in 2019.

"It's incredible and crazy how delicate life is. One thing, one little move, one phone call can change everything. Unbelievable," Kurz mused.

See their art on exhibit during at High Flow Gallery, open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, or at Meuse Gallery, 306 Ocean Ave., open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday through Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday through Saturday.

View images of their paintings at meusegallery.com, on Instagram accounts kid-kurz, bekahbullart, and highflow____, or on Facebook at kurz jck, and Bekah Bull.

Kurz and Bekah also design wearable art and make use of his filmmaking education, producing quirky videos they post almost daily on their social media accounts.

He writes poetry and is working on other projects, including an artistic book titled "My Favorite Color Is Polaroid."

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